Chapter – V

Caste Based Social System
CHAPTER – V
CASTE BASED SOCIAL SYSTEM

The study of social structure enables to know how the various units of the society, which are in direct or indirect contact with one another, behave in their social life with one another. The social structure of India in general and of Tamil Nadu in particular, was based on caste system, which had come down from very early times.¹ The important feature of the social history of Musiri region from the early period to the study period is the caste structure. Caste system formed the basis of the society in Musiri region. It has been a widely prevalent institution throughout India and was not confined to Musiri region alone.

Origin of the caste system
The word ‘caste’ is derived from the Portuguese word ‘casta’ meaning ‘people belonging to a particular social group’. The Indians borrowed the English term caste in the middle of the 15th century AD.² In the opinion of J.H. Hutton, the word ‘caste’ comes from the Portuguese word caste signifying bread, race or kind.³ A.L. Basham observes “when the Portuguese came to India in the 16th century AD, they found the Hindu Community divided into many separate groups which they called castes meaning tribe, clan or families. Caste is the

¹ K. Nambi Arooran, Glimpses of Tamil Culture, Based on Periyapuranam, Meenakshi Books, Madurai, 1977, p. 73.
development of thousands of years of association of many different racial and other groups in a single cultural system. Many scholars defined the term caste in different ways. According to H. Risely, “Caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name, claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, professing to follow the same hereditary calling and regarded by those who are competent to give opinion as forming a single homogeneous community. The name generally is associated with a specific occupation”.

**Ancient Period**

It is admitted on all hands that the caste system did not exist in early Vedic times. The word ‘Varna’ occurring in the Rig Veda did not imply the present meaning of caste system. It marked only ‘colour-bar’ which separated the Aryans from the non-Aryans. On the basis of occupations, divisions, the people were divided into four groups. The Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaisyas, were given the name ‘Savarnas’ or ‘high castes’. The Sudras who belonged to the fourth rank, the lowest cadre of the social structure were mostly unclean labourers and slaves. They were considered unfit to perform the Vedic ceremonies. Since the Sudras were denied the right to wear the sacred thread and the right to perform Vedic rituals, they came to be called ‘Avarnas’. The pre-Aryan natives of India were relegated to the position of Sudras. The Pre-Aryan ruling classes

---

were accorded the status of Kshatriyas. This grouping according to occupational pursuits seems to have lasted for a long time. It was in course of time that the 'Varnas' developed into 'jatis' and class distinctions were superseded by caste separations.\(^8\) The caste system developed in this way could be adopted in the Tamil society also. The various communities living in the Sangam age were called Vettuvar, Irular, Villigal and Pallar.\(^9\)

**Medieval Period**

In the medieval period, the Hindus had developed a very complex social structure. By the beginning of the eleventh century, it was highly a caste-ridden society. Among the four traditional castes, the Brahmins were in the highest place of the society.\(^10\) Religion was the exclusive monopoly of the Brahmins. They enjoyed the social and religious status; they were given exemption from the payment of all taxes.\(^11\) The Kshatriyas were another highest community occupying the next rank to the Brahmins in the society. Though not entitled to officiate as a priest, they were permitted to perform the Puranic rites. The Vaisyas and the Sudras were assigned a lower place in the society. The duty of a Vaisya was to devote himself to agriculture, cattle-breeding and business. The Sudras were servants of the other three higher sections of the society. The Sudras were deprived of all

---


sacred knowledge. They lived near the villages or towns of the four castes but outside them.\(^{12}\)

The *Tholkapiam* refers to four classes – Arasar, Andanar, Vanigar and Vellalar. The Vellalar is mentioned as the fourth class in the Tamil society.\(^{13}\) The Tamil literary work, the *Purananuru* says that there were four *kudis* or classes of the people; they were Tudiyan, Panan, Parayan and Kadamban.\(^{14}\)

The 'Parayas' were the drummers in the Sangam society, 'Parai' means drum. The Poet Mangudi Maruthanar does not use the word 'Jati', but he speaks of 'Kudi' that means group of people.\(^{15}\) The terms 'Melor' and 'Keezhhor' appearing in Tholkappiam denote the meaning 'Uyarnthor' and 'Thalzhnthor' that mean people in the high status and low status respectively. The later division 'Naalvakai Jati' was only a conventional expression.\(^{16}\) It is found in the inscriptions of the Pallava period, the existence of four divisions namely, the Brahmanas, the Kshatriyas, the Vaisyas, and the Sudras. Besides these four groups, there lived other people in the society, namely traders, artisans, agriculturists, etc.\(^{17}\) The Parayas also belonged to the agricultural group and they were termed as 'low caste'. They were eating flesh of animals including cows. They lived

\(^{14}\) *Purananuru*, v. 335.
\(^{15}\) *Ibid*.
outside the village or city called ‘Cheri’ and ‘Paraicheri’. They were under the control of the land-owning Vellalas. The Saiva saint Nandanar belonging to this caste lived in the Pallava period. The ‘Valangai’ and ‘Idangai’ divisions also flourished during the Pallava period. These castes had many sub-sections. They served in the army and managed the temples.

During the Chola period the caste system came to acquire further dimensions. During the period of Kulottunga-I (1071-1122 AD), there took place conflict between the right hand and the left hand castes in the village of Raja Mahendra-Chatur Vedhimangalam. The main reason of conflict was to safeguard the property of the temple treasury and to maintain their social status.

The Bhakti Movement in the medieval South India played an important role in reducing the rigorousness of untouchability. At that time, Saivism and Vaishnavism were the major sects in Tamil Nadu. Among the sixty-three Nayanmars and the twelve Alvars, Nandanar, a Saivite and Tiruppan Alvar, a Vaishnavite in their humble way contributed to the Bhakti Movement belonged to the untouchable community. They were of lower birth. It is to be noted that they were not allowed to enter the temples in Chidambaram and Srirangam respectively for worship.

---

18 Ibid., p. 200.
Castes Groups in Musiri Region

People of Musiri region can be broadly classified into three major groups both on grounds of birth and wealth namely the high castes, the intermediate castes, and the lower castes. The higher castes consisted of the Brahmins, and the Vellalas. The intermediate castes included Chettiyar, Ambalakkarar, Kallar, Nadar, Oorali Goundar, Kammalar, Yadhava, Devanga, Kaikolar, Kurumba, etc., The lower order consisted of the Pallar, Paraiyar, Chakkiliyar, Vannar, Kuravar, Ambattar, etc. Apart from these categories, the Muslims and Christians also lived in the areas.

The high castes enjoyed unique privileges. They owned majority of the wealth and the property of the region. Huge agricultural estates and industries belonged to them. Luxury was their exclusive privilege. Inheriting huge wealth accumulated through generations, they led a life full of pleasure. They put on costly clothes of innumerable varieties. They spent lavishly for food and dishes while the poor were roofing in hunger. They had all medical and educational facilities at their command. They were also engaged in sports and games which the poor could not afford. The following passages will highlight the aspects and details of different caste group. This would help to understand the entire social structure of Musiri region.

Ambalakaras

The Ambalakaras are found mostly in Perambalur, Kulithalai, Thottiam, Thuraiyur and Musiri taluks. Though they may be similar to the Kallars in status and social ranking, ethnically they are
different. They are the same as Mutharaiyars. They have marriage alliances with Muthurajas. Men of these people own lands and in rural area they are mostly engaged in cultivation. The people of this community allow divorces and do not object to the remarriages of widows. They resort to both cremation and burial. These people are also found in Karur, Aravakkurichi and Thuraiyur areas. They do not have regular endogamous divisions. Widow Remarriage is allowed in this community. Apart from their primary occupation, viz., agriculture, they are also engaged in petty trade and some of them eke out on their living as watchmen. They have their own panchayat system. During marriage and funeral ceremonies, they wear *poonul* or sacred threads.

They are the descendants of the Mutharaiyas, who ruled the Pandya, Chola and Konadu countries from 5th century A.D. to the middle of the ninth century AD 850 as local chieftains. They have different titles such as Muthurajas, Servais, Mutharaiyars, Kavalkarars, Valayars etc. 23

**Agamudaiyars**

Agamudaiyars, another cultivating class, form a caste similar to the Maravar and Kallar concentrate a majority in Musiri and Thuraiyur taluks. The word ‘Agamudaiyars’ means a householder or a landholder. 24 The titular name of an Agamudaiyars is Serveikarar. Men of this caste are employed in large number by Zamindars and

---

others as domestic servants; but the great bodies of them were poor and humble ryots. They were divided into three groups, viz. ordinary Agambadiyars, Rajabasha, and Agamudaiyars.25

Kaikkolas or Sengunthars
The Kaikkolas of the region were a caste of weavers. They live mostly at Thuraiyur and Thottiam taluks. The Kaikkolas came to be known as Mudalis; some of them bore the suffix ‘Nayanar’. Some Kaikkolas were soldiers. This community was divided into 72 nadus or desams. Of these 44 formed the ‘mel’ (Western) and 24 ‘kil’ (Eastern) nadus.26 Among these Kaikkolas some of the women were dedicated to the temple and became dancers. It became the practice for every Kaikkolas family to dedicate at one girl to temple service. But the Kaikkola dancers were distinct from other castes, though they too, fell a prey to temple probation.27

The Sengunthars are also known as Kaikolars. They suffix the title ‘Mudaliar’ to their names. These people are the indigenous weavers of Tamil Nadu. They weave dhoties and sarees. It is said that they are not skilled in weaving finer cloth like the Devangas or the Sowrashttras. In Karur taluk, they are found engaged mostly in weaving bed spreads and towels.

26 K.K. Pillay, Studies in the History of India with Special Reference to Tamil Nadu, University of Madras, Madras, 1979, p. 334.
27 Ibid., p. 335.
Among the Sengunthars there are three or four endogamous sections.\(^{28}\) Generally they are in other communities. One section among them is proficient in playing drums and nadhasuram. Thus they play in marriages and other auspicious occasions. They regularly play these instruments in temples. They worship Angalamman, Kamatchiamman etc.

**Kallar**

The Kallars are inhabited in Musiri and Thottiam regions. Kallars were one of the three castes included in the category of Mukkulathor viz., Kallar, Maravar and Agamudaiyars.\(^{29}\) Various meanings have been given to explain the term ‘Kallar’. The term *Kallan* or *Kallar* literally means a thief and there is ample evidence to show that until recently they constituted professional robbers and thieves. They had a regular system called ‘Kudikaaval’ under which each village paid certain fees to be exempted from theft. They had another system called ‘tuppukkooli’ or payment for clues, under which those who paid half the price of the cattle stolen were restored by Kallar intermediaries.\(^{30}\) According to the tradition, the Kallar formed an important section of the armies of the Tamil kings and chiefs in olden days, when fighting were even more important profession than agriculture. The Kallars were professing Saivites. Their chief deity is Alagar Swamy.\(^{31}\)

---

\(^{28}\) Ibid.


\(^{30}\) B. S. Baliga., *op. cit.*, p. 116.

Korava members are the nomad tribes which permeates to length of the Indian peninsula, through countries where many languages and dialects are spoken, are likely to be known by different names in different localities under this caste. They are known as Korava. These people are mostly, inhabited in Thuraiyur. It is noted by H.A. Stuart that the Koravas or Yerukalas are a vagrant tribe found throughout the down south of India. The Koravas are a gipsy tribe found all over the Tamil country according to Francis quoted by Edgar Thurston in his book.\textsuperscript{32}

Korava society is purely patriarchal and in whatever division of the caste, a Korava may be born, he has to subordinate himself to the will of his elders or the leaders of his particular gang. The head of a gang is called the Peru Manusan or Periya Manusan. He is selected principally because of his age, intelligence and the influence he commands amongst the members of the gang. There are a great many classes of Koravas, most of them obtaining their names from the particular occupations they have followed as an ostensible means of livelihood for many generations.

It is recorded in the Gazetteer of the Trichinopoly District, that the Kuravars are divided into a number of endogamous sections of which the Ina Kuravars and the Kavalkarar Kuravars are the most criminal; especially the latter.\textsuperscript{33} The latter are also called the Marasa, Mondu and Kadukutti Kuravans. In dress and appearance


\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid}, pp. 438-450.
the Namakkal Kuravars are said to be superior to those of Karur, and to look like well dressed Vellalars or Pallis. They are peculiar in wearing long ear-rings. They are also said to be much better thieves than the others and to dislike having a Karur Kuravar when breaking into a house for fear he might wake the household by his clumsiness.\(^{34}\)

**Kurumba**

As bearing on the disputed question of the connection between the Kurumbas who dwell in the jungle. They live in Kottapalayam panchayat, Uppiliapuram union. "The Kurumbas or Kurrubas are the modern representatives of the ancient Kurumbas or Pallavas, who were once so power full throughout Southern India, but very little trace of their greatness now remains".\(^{35}\) In the 7\(^{th}\) century AD, the power of the Pallava kings seems to have been at its zenith; but, shortly after this the Kongu, Chola, and Chalukya chiefs succeeded in winning several victories over them.

The final overthrow of the Kurumba sovereignty was effected by the Chola king Adondai about the seventh or eighth century AD and the Kurumbas were scattered far and wide. Many fled to the hills, to Nilgiris, Wyanad in Coorg and Mysore, representatives of this ancient race are now found as wild and uncivilised tribes. Elsewhere the Kurumbas are more advanced and are usually shepherds and weavers of coarse woolen blankets".\(^{36}\)

---

\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 452.

\(^{35}\) Madras Census Report, 1891.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., pp. 155-156.
**Maravar**

Maravars were farmers, fighters, hunters and priests.\(^37\) They live majority at Musiri taluk. Maravar, the name may be connected with the word ‘maram’ which means killing, ferocity, bravery and the like. They live almost entirely by cultivation and are considered to be one of the lowest of the respectable castes, although the Sethupathis of Ramnad and Rajas of Sivagangai have always been men of the Maravar castes.\(^38\) There were seven well-marked subdivisions of the Marava castes: the Ambu-nattu Maravar, the Agata Maravar, the Orur-nattu Maravar, the Pukottai Maravar, and the Kurichi-kattu Maravar. Amongst these subdivisions, the Sembu nattu Maravar is the principal caste. There are also other minor sub divisions.\(^39\) Saivism is the religion of most Maravar, but they worship their own peculiar local deities, Karuppanna Swamy, Bhadrakali, Madurai Veeran and others. All Maravars bear the title of ‘Devar’.\(^40\)

**The Muttaraiyars or Muthurajas**

The Muttaraiyars are otherwise known as Ambalakarars are more numerous in Musiri region and Tiruchirappalli district than in any other parts of Tamil Nadu. Though they have sometimes been treated as separate castes they appear to be one and the same in this region, generally calling themselves Muttaraiyars in Musiri region and Ambalakarar elsewhere, and having no objection to either name.

---

\(^{37}\) David Ludden, *Peasant History in South India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1986, p. 82.


\(^{39}\) Ibid.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., pp. 40-41.
Even though they all use the titles there seems to be some connection between the Uralis, and the Ambalakarars and Muttaraiyars. Muttaraiyar is a sub-division of both Urali and Ambalakarar, and both of these were found in the Musiri region. Perhaps the Uralis are an offshoot of the Tamil Valaiyars, which by change of occupation has transformed itself into a distinct caste, Muttaraiyars, Ambalakarar, Servaikarar and Kavalkarar. Their usual occupation was cultivation, but they have also taken to petty trade and some earn livinghood as masons and Kavalgarars or watchmen. They wear the sacred thread during their marriage and funerals. They had panchayats for each village.

Nadars

The Shanars were toddy-tapers. They lived majority at Uppiliyapuram region. Regarding the meaning ‘Shanar’ some historians think that it is derived from the word ‘saru’ meaning ‘Palmyra juice’ and the Shanars were tapers of Palmyra juice or toddy. But some others define the word ‘Shan’ is derived from two words ‘Shan’ and ‘nar’ that the noose, one span length used by the Shanars in climbing the Palmyra trees. Apart from the toddy-tapers, Shanars were also cultivators, merchants, priests and warriors. They are said to have been captured by Karikala Chola during his conquest of Ceylon and were brought to Tamil Nadu. Karikala Chola

---

43 Ibid., p. 106.
45 David Ludden, *Peasant History in South India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1986, p. 82.
employ them in the construction of a dam across the river Cauvery.\textsuperscript{46} Shanars were born of a Shudra male and a Shudra widow.\textsuperscript{47} As late in the 13\textsuperscript{th} century, the Shanars were known as Ilavas or Ezhavas were also called the ‘Ilaputchi’. Tax was levied by Tamil kings on all toddy tappers.\textsuperscript{48} They were considered a polluting caste in those days.\textsuperscript{49}

Shanar is not found in the earlier Tamil literature at all. In the inscriptions of Rajaraja Chola (984-1013 AD) toddy drawers are referred to as ‘Iluvan’. The Shanar say that Shanar is derived from the Tamil word ‘Sanrar’ or ‘Sanror’, which means the learned or the noble. But it does not appear that the Shanars were ever called Sanrar or Sanror in any of the Tamil works. The word Shanar is ordinarily derived from Tamil ‘Saru’, meaning toddy. Those Shanars who are engaged in the palmyra (Borassus Flabellifer) forests in extracting the juice of the palm-tree, climb with marvellous activity and dexterity.\textsuperscript{50}

The Shanars are also known as Nadars.\textsuperscript{51} The Nadars were the owners of the land and they cultivated the lands with the help of Paraiyas and Pallas.\textsuperscript{52} The Shanars and Nadars occupy a peculiar

\textsuperscript{46} Vincent A. Smith, \textit{The Early History of India}, Clarendan Press, Oxford, 1924, p. 481.
\textsuperscript{47} Ghurye, \textit{Caste and Class in India}, Popular Book Department, Bombay, 1950, p. 156.
\textsuperscript{48} R. Ramaswamy, op. cit., p. 143.
\textsuperscript{50} Edgar Thurston, op. cit., pp. 363-378.
\textsuperscript{52} K. R. Hanumanthan, \textit{Untouchability, A Historical Study Upto 1500 AD (With Special Reference to Tamil Nadu)}, Bharathi Press, Madurai, 1979, p. 106.
status. Nadars seem to have been employed in tax collection by Pandyas and later by the Nayaks. They were called Nadars or Lords of the Land. As hereditary tax collectors, the Nadars held civil authority over the lands on their control. In early days the Shanars and Nadars were an untouchable community till late in the 19th and even early 20th centuries. They were treated as untouchable community. They were not allowed to enter in the Hindu temples. They were not permitted to draw water from the public wells.  

**Pillais**

There are two different sects of Pillais in this region; one is the Arunattu Pillais and the other is the Saiva Pillais. While the latter are strict vegetarians but the former are non-vegetarians by birth. They lived in Thuraiyur and Musiri taluk. The Saiva Pillais are ranked above all other non-Brahmin castes and they consider themselves as second only to the Brahmins in the social pyramid whereas the Arunattu Pillais are ranked along with the Reddiars.

The Arunattu Pillais are also known as *Mottai Vellalas*. This is because; according to their caste custom they are supposed to shave off their moustaches and beards. But, currently, this custom is not in vogue. The Arunattu Vellalas have nothing in common with the Saiva Pillais who are found in large numbers in Tirunelveli district. It is said that the Arunattu Vellalas were known as Kavundars about three to four generations back but in course of time, they adopted the more honourable title ‘Pillais’. These people came to be known

---

as Arunattu Vellalas since they were predominantly found in Six Nadus in Salem and Tiruchirappalli districts. One such Nadu extends over large portions of Musiri and Tiruchirappalli taluks and around Thuraiyur.\footnote{K. S. K. Velmani, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 281-282.}

The ritual structure of these people is similar to those of the other Non-Brahmin communities. However, they have some customs peculiar to themselves. Marrying of sister’s daughter is prohibited among them. For many non-Brahmin communities, the sister’s daughter stands next to the paternal aunt’s daughter and the maternal uncle’s daughter is the list of preferred degrees of marriageable relatives. But, the Arunattu Vellalas differ from others in this respect.

Arunattu Vellalas consult astrologers before fixing up a matrimonial alliance. A small section of them resorts to the strange custom of \textit{Pookkattuthal} or betrothal ceremony is slightly different from that of the others. The groom’s party presents a new saree along with flowers and sandal to the bride and the groom’s sister puts a garland around the bride’s neck to signify that the girl has been engaged to her brother. This custom is peculiar to the Arunattu Vellalas.

The wedding among the Arunattu Vellalas is held at the groom’s house. On the day prior to the marriage, a party of relatives (odd number) from the groom’s house go to the bride’s place to fetch her. The bride takes leave off her people by prostrating and
obtaining their blessings. This is called *Pen Azhaithal*. At this time, the Parisa Panam or the traditional bride’s price is paid to the bride’s party. They engage Brahmin-priests to officiate at their weddings. They have the consummation of the marriage separately on an auspicious day.  

**Reddiars**  
Reddiars, who are a small community in the district, are scattered throughout Kulithalai, Lalgudi, Musiri, Thuraiyur, Thottiam and Perambalur taluks. Most of the Reddiars are land holders and very prosperous. Very few of them are landless. The Reddis of Tiruchirappalli district belong to Kammapuri sect. They are further divided into a number of exogamous sects for purposes of marriage alliances. These Telugu speaking Vaishnavites are mostly non-vegetarians. They do not permit divorces and remarriages. The Reddis are supposed to have migrated to Tami Nadu during the reign of Vijayanagar kings. Their traditional occupation is agriculture. But in due course they assumed the role of Kshatriyas. They represent the genius of the ‘Kaapas’, the Telugu word suggesting ‘Protectors’. The term Reddis is a title denoting ‘temporal authority’. The Reddis apart from agriculture have diverted their attention to other areas of business.

**Tottiyars**  
The Tottiyars or Kambalattars are chiefly found in the Musiri region. They said that they were the immigrants from the Tungabhadra and

---

55 Ibid.  
they left the country in order to avoid the vengeance of the Muhammedan rulers who were angry because they had promised one of their girls in marriage to a Muhammedan and then broken their promise. The Tottiyars were mostly the cultivators. They had their own special beginning of their caste, which were known as Urimbaikkarars because they play a wind instrument called Urimbi at the festivals.

The Tottiyars were numerous in the Musiri region, and include two grades in the social scale of which one consists of those who are engaged in cultivation. The other was made up of those who wander about begging and doing menial works. Between the two classes there was neither inter-dining nor intermarriage. The Tottiyars were supposed to be one of the nine Kambalam (blanket) castes, which according to one version, were made up of Koppiliyars, Anappars, Tottiyar, Kurubas, Kummaras, Parivarams, Urumikkarars, Mangalas and Chakkiliyars. Thottiars mostly live in Thottiam and Musiri taluks.

Udaiyars

The Udaiyars were usually numerous in Musiri and Thuraiyur regions. They were other-wise called Nattamar villagers, the Malaiyamars (Hillman) and the Sudarmars (Man of virulent). Among these titles the Malaiyamans are found chiefly in the villages near the Pachaimalai and Kollimalai hills, and the Sudarmars are

---

58 F. R. Hemingway, op. cit., pp. 121-123.
59 Edgar Thurston, op. cit., Vol. VII, p. 188.
numerous in the east of Musiri. They are generally cultivators, and with the exception of the Sudarmars, who are supposed to live for crime and law-abiding citizens. One section of the Sudarmars, the Muppars, had a bad reputation for criminality. They have no regular caste panchayats and they do not allow widow remarriage. Their weddings are performed in the bride-grooms' house.\textsuperscript{60}

**Urali**

The Uralis are practically confined to the Musiri region of Tiruchirappalli district and parts of Madurai district. The Uralis were described as a caste of agricultural labourers found mostly in Musiri and Thuraiyur taluks. The word 'Urali' means a ruler of a village. Like Ambalakkarar, they trace their descent from one Mutturaja, and only subdivision returned by any member was *Mutracha*. They also assert that they were formerly employed as soldiers.\textsuperscript{61}

They belonged to the 'Muttu-Raja Kuttan', a phrase they cannot explain and protect that the Ambalakkarar who make a similar claim, have no ground for doing so. Their ordinary title is Kavundar. They were split into seven nadus, which were in effect endogamous sub-divisions. These were after villages in the country inhabited by the caste; namely Vadaseri, Pilluru, Sengudi, Kadavangudi or Virali, Talakka, Palavinji or Magali and Marungi. The members of the first three were called the Vadaseri-Uralis and the other four Nattamai Uralis. They were generally cultivators, but sometimes they commit

\textsuperscript{60} F.R. Hemingway, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-109.
crimes. They wear sacred threads at the time of marriages and funerals.\textsuperscript{62}

Vanniyar

The name of the Vanniyar community is a synonym of Palli. The name Vanniyar further occurs as a sub-division of Ambalakarar and Valaiyar. Some Maravars of the Musiri Region also are known as Vanniyar or Vannikutti. The Pallis are a very numerous caste in this region, where the Tamil language, their native tongue, is prevalent. They had many sub-divisions. The Pallis worked as cultivators of irrigated fields and gardens. They were found mostly in the present South Arcot, Chengleput and North Arcot districts. Pallis were referred after the name of their villages Mullurpalli (The Palli of Mullur).\textsuperscript{63} Sometimes Kudi-Palli is used instead of Palli. Some chiefs of this area considered themselves as the leaders of the Vanniya community, as seen from their titles like Vanniya Makkal Nayan and Vanniya Madevan.\textsuperscript{64} An inscription of Parakrama Pandya (1318 AD) refers to an earlier Chola inscription dated 1122 AD, which in turn mentions the Pallis as the holders of Kani (Kanudaiya Pallikal) in many villages in the northern part of the dry zone. This inscription refers to them collectively as Palli-nattar or Pan-nattar.\textsuperscript{65}

Vellalas

The Vellalas held a position that was superior to other castes in the social hierarchy but below the rank of the Brahmins. The Vellalas

\textsuperscript{62} F.R. Hemingway, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 112-113.
\textsuperscript{63} SII Vol. XVII, No. 249.
\textsuperscript{64} SII Vol. VII, Nos. 117 and 137.
\textsuperscript{65} ARE No. 35 of 1913.
were a cultivating class of the Tamil country. As a social group in the Hindu hierarchy, the Vellalars belonged to the Shudra division, and they were occupying a predominant position among the Dravidian race. They speak Tamil and mostly settled in the fertile regions of Tamil Nadu and began to rely on agrarian life. Musiri region is a fertile land located on the river bank of Cauvery, in which mostly Solia Vellalas were in possession of huge lands.

The word 'Vellalar' which derived from 'Vellanmai' (Vellam or Flood + Anmai or Management) means cultivation and suggested that a Vellala was a cultivator rather than a man of a particular tribe or country. In the medieval times, Vellalas, the agricultural community, formed themselves into a corporation called Chitrameli (Meli in Tamil meaning Plough-share) and its members were called Chitrameli Periyanattar. They were also known as Bhumiputtirar and Nattumakkal. Vellalas were also known as Pillais. As far as Tamil Nadu is concerned the old inhabitants of Marutham land retained the title 'Vellalar'. But during the medieval period some other groups also began to call themselves as Vellalar. In the Pandya and Chola countries these Vellalas got the title as Pillai and in Thondaimandalam they were known as 'Mudaliar'.

First of all, the Vellalas were split up into four main divisions such as Thondaimandala Vellalar (Pallava country), Solia Vellalar (Chola country), Pandya Vellala and Kongu Vellala (Coimbatore,

---

66 P. T. Srinivasa Iyengar, op. cit., p. 3.
68 ARE No. 209 of 1937 and 117 of 1900.
During the period between 8th and 12th century A.D., they settled in Tulunadu called Tuluva Vellalar. They hailed from the Ganga dynasty of Tulunadu, a part of modern Karnataka. The Tuluva Vellala settled in Tondaimandalam, at Karaikkadu and moved towards the South, to help the Nayaks to suppress the native Vellalars. They are also known as Karkarttar Pillai or Karaikkattu Pillai. J.H. Nelson points out that the Vellala clans were divided into five such as the Arumbukutti clan, the Karaikattu clan, the Konga clan and the Chola clan and the Kodikkal or betel vine clan. In Musiri region the Vellalas are described as a peace loving frugal, and industrious people, engaged in cultivation of rice, betel, tobacco, etc., have perhaps no equals in the world.

Among the four divisions of Vellalas, the Soliya Vellalas were the predominant division. The members of the four divisions resemble one another in their essential customs. The Soliya Vellalas are sub-divided into the Vellan Chettis, meaning the Vellala merchants, the Kodikkal Vellala of betel garden who grow the betel vine and the Kanakkilinattar, or inhabitants of Kanakkilinadu. The Soliya Vellala is generous and they are generally regarded as of

---

70 K. K. Pillay, op. cit., p. 325.
71 U. N. Singh, Genesis and Growth of Tenancy in India with Special Reference to Tamil Nadu, Proceedings of the Second Annual Conference of the South Indian History Congress, Madurai, 1981, p. 143.
72 Encyclopedia Asiatica, op. cit., p. 1006.
75 J. H. Hutton, op. cit., p. 28.
76 Ibid.
doubtful descent. The members of the Soliya Vellalas are the special devotees of the Siva of the region.\(^77\)

Generally the Vellalas were the cultivators of land. They were mostly land owners, keeping tenants in their lands. Since the Brahmins were forbidden to plough the land, the Vellalas were supremely important in the rural economy.\(^78\) Vellalas for instance, believe themselves to possess the right to claim the honour, respect, and service of a wide variety of non-Brahmin subordinate castes.\(^79\) Besides a high social status, the Vellalas also owned a major portion of the land, held civil and military offices under the rule.\(^80\) Pallars and Paraiyars were employed as labourers in their farm lands.

The Soliya Vellalas are numerous in Musiri region. They are generally regarded as of doubtful descent, since parvenus who wish to be considered Vellalas usually claims to belong to this sub division. Its members are the devotees of Siva. The Arunattu Vellalas chiefly reside in each village of Musiri taluk and Namakkal taluks. They are called Mottai Vellala apparently because they always shave their moustaches and wear only a patch of hair (Kudumi). The widows always dress in white and wear no ornaments and they never marry their sisters’ daughter. Their wives wear the tali on a golden thread like that of the Panda Redis’ of their six nadus, which are supposed to have been located there on each side of

\(^77\) Ibid.
\(^80\) K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, op. cit., pp. 87-88.
the Aiyar river, only two are now reorganized. These are the 'Sarkudi Nadu' in Namakkal and the Omandur Nadu of Musiri.\(^8^1\)

**Trading Communities**

**Chettis**

Chettis were traders corresponding to the Vaishyas in the traditional fourfold caste system of the ancient Indian society. Through the ages, the Chettis had many sects such as Nattukkottai Chetti, Komutti Chetti, Nagarattar, Kasukkara Chetti, Beri Chetti and Kuthirai Chetti.\(^8^2\) Among the Chettis, the outstanding groups of the Musiri Chettiars were Nattukkottai Chetti. The Headman of the Nattukkottai Chetti usually held the title Nattarasan Chetti Thevan. The Vanikar and Nagarathar were the sub sects of the Nattukkottai Chettis.\(^8^3\) They were money lenders. They took part in temple administration, daily prayers, festival, offered money and gold jewels to the temple.\(^8^4\) They were staunch Saivites and resided throughout Musiri region they live.

**Seniyar**

The name Seniyar is generally used to denote the Karna Sale weavers but at Kanchipuram it is applied to Canarese Devangas. Elsewhere Canarese Devangas belong to the left-hand section, but at Kanchipuram they are classed with the right hand section. The Devangas claim Markandeya as their ancestor. The Kanchipuram

---


Seniyars are Lingayats, but are not as strict as the Canarese Lingayats. They live in Kottapalayam panchayat of Thuraiyur taluk.

Weaving Communities
Saliyars and Padma Saliyars
These people are skilled weavers whose mother-tongue is Telugu and majority live in Musiri. It is said that they were brought to Tamil Nadu by the Chola King Rajendra-I. They are mostly engaged in weaving sarees of inner counts. These people found mostly in Musiri taluk, style themselves as Chettiar. They do not permit widow remarriage.

Servicing communities
Ambattar
The Ambattars are the Tamil barbers or barber-surgeons living in this region. The word ‘Ambattar’ is derived from the Sanskrit words ‘amba’ (near) ‘tha’ (to stand). They were to serve all the Tamil castes. They used the same razor to hundreds of individuals. The barbers were not unnaturally looked upon as an unclean and detestable race of men as those of the other unclean communities such as the Paraiyas and the Chakkiliyas. Manu is answerable for Sanskrit saying, barber as a ‘Good Shudra’. The barber’s touch did not pollute after the shaving. Brahmins were invited for their

---

86 In the opinion of Nambiar, the Editor of the 1961 Census Report, these people as weavers are more skilled than the Sengunthars.
87 Ibid., p. 289.
88 JH Nelson, op. cit., p. 73.
marriage celebrations. Brahmins attend their marriage and chant mantras. Then the bridegroom ties the ‘tali’ around the neck of the bride. After the marriage, the Brahmins would receive a fee of money and silk clothes. The other Scheduled Castes have their own barbers and washer men. Each social class has its own Ambattar.

Brahmin

Among the upper castes of the society of Musiri Region, the Brahmins occupied a place of unique honour and respect. But even among the Brahmins of Musiri region, there existed a number of subdivisions. They live throughout Musiri region. According to Abbe Dubois, “Among the Brahmins of the South of the peninsula for example, there are to be found three or four principal divisions and each of these again is subdivided into twenty others”. Strangely enough there was no close relation between various divisions of the same Brahmin community and they were “differing in language, manners and customs”. But “though divided by caste, the population (Brahmins) has a great similarity of manners”.  

The Brahmins formed only a small fraction of the total population of Musiri region. Edgar Thurston have observed that “the Brahmins in these regions were relatively few”. The Brahmins lived in separate colonies which were well planned with wide streets and spacious houses provided with necessary amenities. Being

89 Edgar Thurston, op. cit., p. 123.
91 Edgar Thurston, op. cit., p. 267.
92 Ibid., p. 269.
93 Ibid.
highly educated they were the blessed ones. Learned professions came to be monopolised by the Brahmins. They were highly respected by every section of the society. "Though the Nayars were the most influential section of the society in the 19th century, they are still, to measure, their slaves".\textsuperscript{94} Though they were few in number, they occupied the predominant position in Musiri region. Musiri contains a few houses of Brahmins. Thirunarayanapuram is a populous town with regular streets inhabited chiefly by Brahmins. There were other villages where Brahmins had chosen to live.

In regard to Vaishnavas, there were two distinct groups-the Vadagalai (Northerners) and the Thengalais (Southerners). The Vadagalai Brahmin put on a ‘U’ shaped mark and Thengalai Brahmin put a ‘Y’ shaped mark on their forehead of these sects.\textsuperscript{95} The Saiva Brahmins who were mostly Tamils were called by the title Ayyan, the Principal sect of Vaishnava Brahmins who were mostly Telugu were called by the title Aiyangar.\textsuperscript{96}

Marriage customs of the Brahmins of Musiri region were rigid and they did not marry from any other castes. They generally participate in the marriage functions of the other castes. At the non-Brahmin Hindu marriages and funerals, the rich Hindus wished to distinguish themselves by making large donations to Brahmins involved in the mercantile activities and those who lived on the

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{95} B. S. Baliga, op. cit., p. 102.
proceeds of their own property and farm cultivation of their inherited lands. Throughout Musiri region they live.

**Kammalas**

The Kammala or artisans of the Tamil country were the leading community of the 'Idangai' class. They regarded themselves as Brahmins and descendents of Viswakarma, the divine artificer. They assumed the title Acharya, wore the sacred thread and performed other religion ceremonies. The Kammalas were well organised in the five divisions such as Tattan (goldsmith), Kannan (brass-smith), Thaccan (Carpenter), Kaltachen (stone mason) and Kollan or Karuman (black smith). Inscriptions also mention them as builders and brass workers. The Kammalas were also known as Rathakaras. They seem to have rapidly risen in their social status during the Chola period. Kammala as Anuloma was born of a male of higher caste and female of a lower caste namely Ambattar (barber). An inscription records the privileges granted to certain members of the Anuloma Rathakara castes. They possessed even high sounding titles such as Chakravarthi meaning ‘emperor’, ‘Peruntattan meaning ‘a great gold smith’. Kammalas were vegetarians. They live in Thuraiyur, Thottiam, and Musiri taluks.

---

97 Ibid.
100 ARE No. 413 of 1921.
101 SII Vol. XVII, No. 603.
102 ARE No. 189 of 1925.
103 SII Vol. VI, No. 439.
104 ARE No. 201 of 1919.
Kusavars

Kusavars are potter-makers who speak Tamil. According to the legend they are the offspring of a Brahmin father and a Shudra mother. Many in the community used to wear sacred thread which at present seems to be rare. They follow both Saivism and Vaishnavism. They are divided into several endogenous sects on territorial basis. They especially the affluents in this community style themselves as Udayars. Some of the members in this community act as Pujaris in Pidari temple. These Pujaris are also skilled in making hollow images of Pidari, Muniappan, Ayyanar, etc., and their Vaganams such as horses, bulls, etc., in clay. The Kusavars are non-vegetarians and their ceremonies generally follow the pattern of the Vellalas of the area. They do not allow divorce, remarriage and widow marriage. In the marriage ceremonies of Vellalas, the bridal party visits the house of the village potter with pipes and drums to take delivery of the ceremonial pots and places them in the marriage pandal. These ornamental pots are said to represent the assembly and visitation of 33 crores of Devas. For making the mud pots, they use age old implements of horizontal fly wheel. They live in Kottapalayam village, Musiri and Thuraiyur taluks.

Oddars

Oddars are also found in Musiri here and there. They can be found majority at Kottapalayam and Sikkathampur panchayats. They are Telugu speaking caste and as described in the Census Report of 1871

are tank diggers, well sinkers and road makers by tradition. They continue to do even now. The word Odda is said to be a corruption of the Sanskrit term Odhra, the name for the place called Orissa. These people might have migrated from Orissa Southwards during the time of Nayak kings. A mother Goddess called Ankamma is the deity of the Oddars. There are two sects among them viz., the Kal Oddars (Stone workers) and the Man Oddars (Earth workers) form two distinct sects and no social intercourse like marriage takes place between them. The former sect considers themselves to be superior to the latter. It is said that some of the Kal Odders suffix the title Chetti to their names and call themselves Oddar. Oddars live in Kottappalayam, Sikkathampur panchayats.

Vannars

The Vannars were washer men in the Tamil country. The name Vannar is derived from the Tamil word ‘Vannam’ means ‘colour’ or ‘beauty’. In the social structure the Vannars were placed next below to the barbers. They profess to be Saivites in the southern districts, and Vaishnavites in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu. There were also a separate low rank people called the ‘Pothara Vannar’, who were of inferior status, because they wash only for Paraiyas, Pallars and other inferior castes. There is a tradition that they were descendant of the mythological hero ‘Virabhadra’, who was ordered by Siva to wash the clothes of all men, as an expiation of sin of putting many people to death in Daksha’s yaga. Hence the Tamil washer men are frequently called Virabhadra. Having to purify all

106 Ibid., p. 291.
the filthy linen of the villages, they were naturally regarded as a low, unclean class of Shudras, and were always poor. They add to their income by hiring the clothes to their customers to funeral parties, who lay them on the ground before pall-bearers. They are flesh-eaters and drink liquor. The dead are either burned or buried.¹⁰⁷ Each social class has its own Vannars.

**Chakkiliyas**

The Chakkiliyas formed another low caste people and live throughout the Musiri region. They were not the natives of the soil and they came to Tamil Nadu in the wake of the Vijayanagar invasion. They were tanners and had to remove the dead cattle from the village. The Chakkiliyas had to supply leather for agricultural purposes.¹⁰⁸ They seem to have immigrated from Andhradesam and Mysore State and speak Telugu or Kannada at their homes.¹⁰⁹ The name Chakkiliyas Kunti is spoken in an inscription (1030 AD) of the Chola period.¹¹⁰ In social position the Chakkiliyas occupy the lowest rank, though there is much dispute on this point between them and the Paraiyas. Nominally they are Saivites but in reality devil worshippers. They indulge very freely in intoxicating liquors, and eat any flesh including beef, pork, etc. Hence they are called the flesh-eaters par excellence and treated as untouchables.¹¹¹ A peculiar feature is that in the Madurai district the men of the Chakkiliya community belonged to the right hand division while the women

¹¹⁰ SII Vol. VIII, No. 67, p. 36.
belong to the left hand division. They were also specially engaged as village Thotties or Messengers.

**Malaiyalis**

The Malaiyalis are the inhabitants of the Pachaimalai and the Kollimalai. The Malaiyalis of the two ranges would not intermarry, but had no objection to eat together. Each recognizes exogamous sub-divisions or kulas; those of the Pachaimalai were the Tanadi, Vandayar, Sembutar, Naviday, Kalla, Kikkidays, Nevidaya and Kurichidaya and others; and those of the Kollimalais the Kalavi, Sambolan Selumbi, Kolappandi, Ambalam, Valangai, Soludaiyan, Kunaipattar, Sakkiratti etc.

For the purpose of caste discipline, the villages of both sub-divisions are grouped into nadus. Thus the Malaiyalis of the Pachaimalai were divided into the Vennadu, Tenbaranadu and Attinadu. Each nadu contains some 20 or 30 villages. Each village had a headman called as the Pachaimalai Muppan and on the Kollaimalais Ur-Kavundan or Kutti-Maniyam. The headman of the nadu of the Pachaimalai also does duty as Pattakaras (village headmen). Petty disputes are decided by the Pattakarans and matrimonial disputes were sent to his superior. They generally lived by cultivation, and were quiet rather timid folk who are often victimised, owing to their simplicity by trades.

---

They profess either the Saivite or Vaishnavite faith in much the same vague way as other castes of similar social standing. Goddess Kali was also commonly worshipped, but the Malaiyalis did not connect her with Siva. Almost every village further contains temples to Mariyai or Mariamman, the goddess of Cholera and to the village goddess Pidari. The Pidari was often called Mannu-Pidari on the Pachaimalai and was represented by a heap of mud. All these goddesses were worshipped every year before the land was cultivated.\(^{115}\)

The ‘Malaiyalis’ houses were built of thatches of split bamboo and roofed with jungle grass. The use of tiles or bricks might invite the anger of the gods. At home, the men only wear a piece-cloth, but when they visit the plains they wear an upper cloth and a blanket. The Pachaimalai women wear the Kusavam hold in their cloths on the right side, but did not cover the breast.\(^{116}\) They are mostly living in Pachamalai and Kolli Malai hills.

**Pallars**

The Pallars were one among the agricultural communities treated inferior in Musiri region. They live throughout Musiri region. They were serfs in the lands of the individuals and temples.\(^{117}\) They cultivated the lands of the non-Brahmin high castes such as the Nayak, Pillai, and Mudaliyar.\(^{118}\) The Pallars are a class of

---

\(^{115}\) Ibid., p. 125.

\(^{116}\) Ibid., p. 126.


\(^{118}\) *Encyclopedia Asiatica*, Vol. VII, p. 87; *see also* S. Manickam, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
agricultural labourers believed to be one of the earliest inhabitants of Tamil Nadu. For centuries together, they were the cultivators of the land. Tilling of the soil and cultivation of paddy has been done down the ages mainly in the hands of this Pallar community. In Musiri region the members in a Pallar family were employed by their masters in agrarian activities such as ploughing the land, sowing the seeds and watering the field. The females were employed in transplanting the paddy and both were employed for harvest work.\(^{119}\)

The origin of the Pallas is shrouded in mystery and various theories have been formulated by scholars. The Pallas are said to have sprung from the connection between a Shudra man and a Brahmin woman. Another view is that Lord Devendran created them for the purpose of doing manual work for the sake of the Vellalas.\(^{120}\) But there is no fact behind these legendary origins of the Pallas. Bishop R. Caldwell\(^{121}\) and Edgar Thurston\(^{122}\) are of the view that the name ‘Palla’ might have been derived from the word ‘Pallam’, as they were standing on low ground when the castes were created. Pallas was at first instance called ‘Mallar’. They argue that the mountainous people were supposed to assume that name as Pallas. After some time, the Mallar of low lands began to call them Pallas.\(^{123}\) Even though this version is not fully acceptable but it gives


\(^{120}\) Edgar Thurston, *op. cit.*, IV, p. 473.


\(^{122}\) Edgar Thurston, *op. cit.*, p. 474.

\(^{123}\) Gustav Oppert, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
some clue to the former position of the Pallas as Mallar. The new name Pallar is denoting their disreputable position in the society.\textsuperscript{124}

Pallu literature informs that the Pallas is the descendants of the Mallas.\textsuperscript{125} The word ‘Mallar’ means a warrior; they might have been soldiers during the Sangam age\textsuperscript{126} and even in later period. K.R. Hanumanthan is also of the view that the Pallas were an ancient community of Tamil Nadu who worked under the Pallavas as political chieftain with the title of Kurumbar. They owned large stretch of lands too. They were deprived of their land and became the labourers.\textsuperscript{127} But during the greater Chola hegemony, they must have regained their old right of land ownership and military service. They served in Kudumbus, a type of administration committee in the agricultural village of the local self government of Pallavas.\textsuperscript{128} Their service in the Kudumbus must have brought a new title Kudumban.\textsuperscript{129} But the resumption in the life of them as warrior and village administrators received a rude stock during the Nayak rule in Tamil Nadu. The Nayaks deprived them the right of serving in the military and of land ownership to the Kudumbas and enslaved them with the new name Pallars.\textsuperscript{130}

There are many sub-divisions of the Pallar community. There is a proverb that “One can count the number of varieties of paddy

\textsuperscript{124} R. Deva Asirvatham, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 91.
\textsuperscript{125} \textit{Mukkudal Pallu}, V.12.
\textsuperscript{126} Guruswami Siddar, \textit{Tamil Panpattu Varalaru} (Tamil), Tamil Panpadu, Coimbatore, 1996, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{127} K. R. Hanumanthan, \textit{op. cit.}, (\textit{Untouchability}), pp.101-103.
\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Periyapuranam}, v. 1.
\textsuperscript{130} R. Deva Asirvatham, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 252-225.
but it is impossible to count the divisions of the Pallas*. They have been divided into a number of sub-sects such as Aiya (father), Amma (mother), Anga, Atta, etc.* They were called by different names. They assume the title of Kudumban in Tirunelveli district and Pandian in Sengottai taluk. In Chola region, there are such divisions as Moopan, Panikkan, Kaladi, Kadaignan and Vaykkaran and the titles are also the same. In the Kongu region, there are four sub-divisions, Kongu, Pandia, Chola and Kadaignan. The titles assumed by them are Kudumban, Pannadi, Pattakkaran, Mannadi, Pallar and Moopan. Some of the sub-divisions are also based on regional differences, for example, the Amma Palla division is further subdivided into Kodaivalanattar and Seevantha Valanattar and Paruthikkottai Valanattar and Agna Palla division into Sikka Valanattar and Seluvavalanattar. In other regions also, there were such sub-divisions.

Pallars has their own caste headman and panchayat to settle disputes among them and punish the transgressors of caste rules. In fact, they are a well organised community with the hereditary headman called Palakan, a chief guru called Camiar or Karumapuram, a priest called Valluvan and a servant called Otumpillai (Messenger). In Madurai district the headman is called Kudumban whose assistant is called Kalati and messenger Variyan.

---

134 K. R. Hanumanthan, Untouchability, op. cit., p. 103.
In Coimbatore, the headman is called Pattakaran.\textsuperscript{135} The Pallas has their washer men and barbers separately.\textsuperscript{136}

Pallars was mostly labourers and also had performed the variety of jobs such as building and repairing irrigation work and also have built the temples. Groups of a few men would plough, manure and thresh, whereas groups of women planted, transplanted, weeded, harvested and hauled to both threshing floor and storage.\textsuperscript{137}

In early stage, the Pallas enjoyed special privileges in the society. According to an inscription of medieval times (1665 A.D.), they seem to have enjoyed a number of privileges.\textsuperscript{138} But, Pallupattu describes the Pallas being poor agricultural serfs. The Pallas lived in Cheri or known as Paccheri or Patcheri.\textsuperscript{139} An inscription mentioned that the Pallas lived in separate streets called ‘Pallar Theru’.\textsuperscript{140} It is a tradition that the inhabitants of the Pallas are on the Eastern side of the main villages.\textsuperscript{141} This Pallar community belonged to the ‘Idangai’ groups. They were subjected to slavery by the later waves of people. Antiquity and hereditary occupation made them expert in the art of cultivation. As landless serfs, the Pallas was the worst sufferers in the society.

**Paraiyar**

Another important marginalised community in Musiri region next to the Pallar was Paraiyar. They live throughout Musiri region. The

\textsuperscript{135} Edgar Thurston, \textit{op. cit.}, Vol. IV., p. 103.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{137} David Ludden, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 92.
\textsuperscript{138} ARE No. 588 of 1926.
\textsuperscript{139} Mukkulal Pallu, VV. 35-36, and 88.
\textsuperscript{140} SII Vol. II, No. 796.
\textsuperscript{141} KR Hanumanthan, \textit{Pallas of Tamil Nadu, op. cit.}, p. 173.
Paraiyas as a caste seem to have enjoyed certain privileges during the Chola and Vijayanagar period. They were a significant part of the village community, working as field labourers, drum beaters and weavers. It is surmised that the Paraiyas were born of a Shudra male and a Brahmin female.\textsuperscript{142} It is more probable that the Paraiyas were an ancient tribe suppressed by the invading kings and relegated to the position of untouchables owing to their different cultural background.\textsuperscript{143} The invaders reduced them to the position of aggressive serfs and assigned to them duties which it was thought beneath their own dignity to perform.\textsuperscript{144}

The word ‘Paraiya’ is said to be derived from ‘parai’, a drum the people played during festivals, marriages and functions.\textsuperscript{145} Later they were reduced to play drums only for funerals and are considered to be drum beaters. It is true that the Paraiyas act as drum beaters at village festivals, marriages and funerals of the high caste people, even in the early days. But they do so only on occasion and at other times they engage themselves in weaving, cultivating and other works. Some scholars derived the word ‘Paraiyar’ from the word ‘Poraiyar’.\textsuperscript{146} This meant a line of Chera kings according to \textit{Pattuppattu} (Ten anthologies), a Sangam classic. Another, derivation of the word ‘Paraiya’ is from the word ‘Paarai’ meaning rock.\textsuperscript{147}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{142} K. R. Hanumanthan, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 51.
\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{146} A. Perumal Pillai, \textit{Adi Dravidar Varalaru}, (Tamil), Victoria Press, Madras, 1922, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{147} Gustav Oppert, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 60.
\end{flushright}
Thus Paraiyas are considered to be the same as Paraiyas meaning hilly people. Yet another derivation is from the word ‘Parion’ which means the original owners of the land (‘Par’ means ‘earth’ or ‘land’) or rulers of the land. Edgar Thurston holds the view that derived from the ‘Palaiyar’ means ancient people. In Tamil the letter ‘la’ and ‘ra’ are interchangeable. Therefore it is quite possible that the Palaiyar of ancient Tamilagam came to be called as Paraiyar in course of time.\(^\text{148}\) Therefore, though the original Tamil word ‘Paraiya’ seems to have been derived from the word ‘parai’ meaning drum, later on when ‘Paraiyar’ became a despicable caste (outside), it appears to have been derived from the Sanskrit work ‘para’ (outsider) and used for all those who refused to toe the line of Brahmin.

The Paraiyas are said to be sub-divided into 13 groups, the names of which are the following: The Valluva Paraiyars, Tatha Paraiyars, Tonda Paraiyar, Durchali Paraiyar, Kuli Paraiyars, Tiya Paraiyars, Murasu Paraiyars, Ambu Paraiyars, Vaduga Paraiyars, Aliya Paraiyar, Valai Paraiyars, Vettiyan Paraiyars, and Koliya Paraiyar. The subordinate groups of the Paraiyar are very numerous. The most prominent of them are perhaps the following viz. Perum Paraiyar, Egali Paraiyar, Pola Paraiyar, Tavalei Tinnum Paraiyar, Thoti Paraiyar, Sangu Paraiyar, Soliya Paraiyar, Up Paraiyar, Malai Paraiyar are the best known subdivisions of the great Paraiya tribe.\(^\text{149}\)

\(^{149}\) J.H. Nelson, op. cit., pp. 75-78.
The Paraiyas were menial servants of the country.\textsuperscript{150} They lived in separate place or colony called Paraicheri\textsuperscript{151} and Paraiyar Kudiyiruppu.\textsuperscript{152} Panchama is also a synonym for Mala or Paraiyas; they were also referred to as Shudras in inscription. Palladam inscription speaks about Paraiyas,\textsuperscript{153} who served the Vellalas. Paraiyas enjoyed some privileges and also received lands from the kings as gift and cultivated it.\textsuperscript{154}

Therefore the main occupation of the Paraiyas was tom-tom beating. They were asked to beat drum on festive occasion at temples and on all occasions either good or bad for the caste people. They were announcers of the government on commercial matters. For their services to the temple, they were classified with the temple servants. Many took agricultural labour and slavery. Some undertook odd or menial services. Such as hunting, betting birds, leather work, scavenging, washing cloths, weaving, making pottery barbers etc.\textsuperscript{155} In those days, they were treated harshly and called untouchables. They did not come into touch with the high caste people and were not admitted in temples and the homes of the high caste people. They were considered to be a source of pollution.

\textbf{Valluvar}

Valluvar, a section of the Paraiyas actually enjoyed the status of the priests in the ancient Tamil society. It is attested by literary and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{150} Census Report 1871, p. 169, C. D. MacLean, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 68.
\item \textsuperscript{151} \textit{SII} Vol. II, Nos. 4, 47, and 63.
\item \textsuperscript{152} \textit{IPS} No. 386.
\item \textsuperscript{153} \textit{SII} Vol. XXVI, No. 240.
\item \textsuperscript{154} \textit{ARE} No. 86 of 1907.
\item \textsuperscript{155} K.V. Subramamiya Iyer, \textit{Historical Sketches of Ancient Deccan}, Modern, Madras, 1917, p. 358.
\end{itemize}
inscriptional evidences.\textsuperscript{156} Valluvars are even now acting as the priests of Paraiyas.\textsuperscript{157} Some other sections of the Paraiyas were the Vettiyar or the grave digger, the Talaiyari or watchman and the Thotti or scavenger of the village. These people were recruited only from the Paraiyas.\textsuperscript{158} On the other hand, there is a view that the Paraiyas were known as Pulaiyan in the Sangam Age. This view also seems acceptable. It may be noted that at present the Paraiyas are found throughout the Tamil country whereas the Pulaiyans denote a particular scheduled caste in Kerala.\textsuperscript{159}

The Valluvars are summed up by H.A. Stuart as being “the priests of the Paraiyars and Pallars”. Thiruvalluvar the famous Tamil poet and author of Thirukkural, belonged to this caste which is usually regarded as a sub-division of Paraiyars. It appears that the Valluvars were priests to the Pallava kings before the introduction of the Brahmins and even for some time after it. According to another version, the Valluvars are the descendants of an alliance between a Brahman sage and a Paraiya woman, whose children complained to their father of their lowly position. He blessed them and told them that they would become very clever astrologers, and in consequence much respected. They live in Alathudaiyanpatti, Thuraiyur and Thottiam taluks. Both men and women are employed as astrologers and doctors and are often consulted by all classes of people.

\textsuperscript{156} Census Report of 1891 mentions that the Valluvars were priests to the Pallava Kings before the coming of the Brahmin and even some times after.
\textsuperscript{157} K. R. Hanumanthan, Untouchability, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 87.
\textsuperscript{158} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{159} K.K. Pillay, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 337.
Their professional duties included writing charms for sick people, preparing horoscopes and making forecasts of good or evil by means of cabalistic squares marked on the ground. The Valluvans abstain from eating beef. Though they mix freely with the Paraiyars, they will not eat with them and never live in the Paraiya residential quarters. The Valluvars are sometimes called Pandaram or Valluva Pandaram. In some places, the priests of the Valluvars are Vellala Pandarams.\(^{160}\)

Social classes in Musiri region of the study period presented certain unique features. As in other parts of the Tamil Nadu, the society which consisted of the bulk of the population was organised, on the basis of caste system. It was mainly divided into the upper caste, intermediate caste and marginalized caste. Besides enjoying a high status in the society, the high caste people went to the extent of suppressing the low caste people and harassed them in several ways. The Vellalas and Brahmins who belonged to the higher social stratum dominated the society with distinct privileges. Every caste had its own customs and practices in Musiri region.

**Aspects of Social Classes**

People in Musiri Region belonged to a large number of different castes. Caste distinctions were not so unambiguously marked that it was easy to establish the caste membership of a stranger. Caste is understood to organise people into different groups with characteristics that partly reflected an inborn essence, called *gunam*.
and representing an unchangeable quality in a person’s character. Other parts of a person’s character are understood to be acquired, and thus more fluid and open to personal reform for example by adapting the diet.

In Musiri region the members of a caste were thought to share a particular character, revealed in a distinct caste character more or less different from other castes. The Brahmin character, for example, was said to favour intellectual work, while the Vellalar character made them into more of a practical person. The interpretations and evaluations of inborn characters could of course, differ radically. For example, a Kallar could assert that their character made them to a proud and assertive person, whereas a non-Kallar could describe him as destined to be crude and overbearing. Similarly, character made the Paraiyar appear humble and submissive in other people’s eyes; in contrast, a Paraiyar could describe himself as calm and reasonable. Character thus caste people into pre-existing character types, determined by their caste.

This stereotyping human character involved a moral evaluation, resulting a moral ranking of castes. The actual ranking varied according to different points of view, but for example intelligence, rationality and responsibility were generally considered as morally superior traits that were associated with higher castes. Similar kinds of ranking between men and women, between adults and children, existed parallel to the moral ranking of castes. In general, low-caste people, women and children were to some degree considered to lack the morally superior traits.
The belief that people of different castes possessed dissimilar professional abilities was another aspect of character. Chettiyars and Nadars, for example, were believed to have an inborn talent for doing business. When difficulties of commercial life were discussed, their characters were given as the typical explanation for their success in commercial competition. An early training secret business methods, and support from fellow caste members were considered to be other relevant causes.

Interestingly, although farming was considered as a prestigious occupation, it was only weakly associated with any particular caste’s character. Only people of Vellalar, Udaiyar and Pallar castes in Musiri region claimed any inborn talent for farming. Whatever their actual occupation, Vellalar and Udaiyars typically described themselves as farmers, and Pallars considered themselves as experts on paddy cultivation. For people of these castes, farming could be seen as a way of realizing an inborn talent. Shaliyars claimed an inborn talent for weaving, Muthurajas for agriculture, Nadars for Producing toddy.